Striking drywall workers say they won't give up the fight

But replacements are being hired

By L. ERIK BRATT
Staff Writer

Local drywall workers who walked off their jobs June 1 have vowed to continue to protest their working conditions, but subcontract employers already have begun to hire replacements.

"We are going to fight until this is resolved," said Tony Hernandez, labor representative for hundreds of drywall hangers and tapers who are demanding higher wages and overtime and health benefits.

Hernandez said the workers will step up their efforts to picket local construction sites. And they plan to confront replacement workers with a question: "How they would feel if we go back to their own state and start working on their jobs," he said.

Local subcontractors said they have hired 100 to 200 workers to finish work on an estimated 125 residential projects that have been stalled by the five-week-old walkout, and plan to hire several hundred more starting next week, said Bob Winterton, executive vice president of the Associated Builders and Contractors.

A group of 25 subcontractors made Winterton their spokesman earlier this week at a meeting with representatives of 21 local developers, including Pardee Construction, Fieldstone Co., and Nielson Construction Co.

Winterton said the subcontractors have received 400 applications from inside the county, 150 from California and roughly 100 from outside of the state.

The drywallers' labor movement is unusual because, for now, workers are pressing their demands without the benefit of union representation. But a key part of their fight is to pressure subcontractors to sign contracts recognizing union representation for the drywall workers.

Hernandez said the drywallers want to join the Carpenters Union Local 1506 in San Diego, but they face a dilemma. On one hand, drywall workers needed to be employed so they can pay union membership dues. But subcontractors so far have refused to employ union-represented workers.

"The (drywall subcontractors) left the union 10 years ago, and I doubt they are interested in signing a union agreement now," said Winterton.

The workers eventually would like to get at least 80 percent of the subcontractors to sign union contracts in San Diego. They would settle for one or two to start.

"Whoever signs first, we are going to put every single guy back to work (there) and get any job done in a couple of days, even 100 houses," Hernandez said.

A local labor leader said the drywaller's dilemma is typical.

"I think it happens historically at the beginning of a labor movement," said Joe Francis, executive secretary treasurer of the San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council AFL-CIO. "It was out of this type of activity — work stoppages — that labor organizations developed."

Francis said it appears the workers have been exploited by the subcontractors offering low wages and few health benefits.

Winterton denied the subcontractors have exploited anyone. Drywall wages have fallen under financial pressures during the recession, he acknowledged. But the subcontractors are now paying fair wages, he said.

Stepped up security

The homebuilders that rely on the drywallers have vowed to prioritize the projects they need completed first and to boost security at the job sites to protect against picketing or other labor-disturbances, said Frank Panarisi, president of the Construction Industry Federation, which represents seven construction associations in the county.

Union-Tribune / JIM BAIRD

Relief packages: *Donated boxes of food, a show of support for picketing drywall workers, is stacked at the Carpenters Union Local 1506 in San Diego. The carpenters union is supporting the workers but does not officially represent them.*

Fieldstone Co. already has increased the number of security guards at many of its projects, said Fieldstone director of construction Dave Dennig.

Drywall workers have picketed several construction sites around the county, including one Thursday in Coronado that erupted into a shouting match between picketers and construction workers. One person was injured in the incident, according to the Coronado Police Department.

The police reported eight to 12 police officers were called to a construction site on First Avenue in Coronado at 12:40 p.m Thursday after they received a report of a possible injured person. One of an estimated 85 picketers was run over by a construction vehicle and suffered minor injuries to his foot, said Police Lt. Bob Harrison.

The construction workers claim the injured picketer, Gilberto Lopez, 33, was trespassing, while the laborers contend the picketer was pushed by a foreman, according to the report.

"It is still unclear to us who did what to whom," said Harrison, who did not know the name of the construction project.

Police stayed for more than three hours after the mid-day incident to control what Harrison describes as a few minor skirmishes. The last of the picketers left at 3:30 p.m.

Both sides in the labor dispute have preached non-violence, but neither can guarantee what will happen in the future.

Earlier last week, laborers voted 295 to 183 to reject a proposal by subcontractors to boost immediately drywall hangers wages from 5.5 cents per square foot to 6.5 cents, followed by another half-cent increase in October. Tapers' wages would have been boosted from 3.5 cents per square foot to 5 cents.

The workers wanted at least 8 cents per square foot for hangers and 7.5 cents for tapers, Hernandez said.

Local impact

Industry observers differ on what effect the labor walkout has had on the residential construction industry.

Mike Durick, labor relations consultant for the San Diego Building Industry Association, said the labor dispute would likely raise the cost of housing at affected sites due to the added interest costs of holding the land and increased security at many projects. He did not estimate the increase.

Winterton, however, estimated the delays might cost developers $200 to $300 per unit.

Hernandez denied the work stoppage would affect home buyers, saying their wages have been going down for years while the price of housing has increased at a steady rate.

Panarisi of the Construction Industry Federation downplayed the significance of the walkout.

"Economic times don't make it as severe as it could be," Panarisi said. "If (home buyers) were lined up and you couldn't finish the houses, that would be a problem. But that isn't a problem today."

Neither side would predict when the labor strike might end, but both predicted the other would blink first.

The subcontractors have made it through the labor walkout so far by luring a smattering of workers across the picket lines, and looking for help in other markets.

The drywallers, meanwhile, have made it through with the help of Local 1506, which lets them use their facilities as a meeting place. Hernandez said several other sources, including an Orange County restaurateur, have been donating food and money to support the workers during the walkout.

Make a wise investment by reading Don Bauder in The San Diego Union-Tribune. Subscribe today — call 299-4141.

Drywallers, union backers clash at Sun City work site

A drywallers' strike has included allegations that strikers have vandalized construction projects and threatened, beaten and shot at site workers.

By Tim O'Leary
and Loren Fleckenstein
The Press-Enterprise

A monthlong labor dispute turned violent in Sun City yesterday as non-union construction workers said they were threatened and assaulted and four of their vehicles damaged.

Suspects — union supporters — caused a road closure before they were rounded up by Riverside County sheriff's deputies. They were subsequently released. No arrests were made.

Drywall workers at the Hillpointe subdivision east of Highway 215 said they might arm themselves to prevent a reoccurrence of yesterday's 11:45 a.m. incident at the end of Cannon Drive. The workers said they were angry because the men they accused of assault, vandalism and trespassing were not arrested.

"They might not be back tomorrow, but we'll be ready," said drywaller Michael Veler of Moreno Valley. "Isn't that something? You have to come to work with a hammer in one hand and a .45 (caliber pistol) in another."

Riverside County Sheriff's Sgt. Bill DeLuna said the strikers who were pulled over could not be arrested because Hillpointe workers were unable to identify specific men as vandalism or assault suspects.

Several vehicles containing men with placards were pulled over on McCall Boulevard east of Highway 215 by a swarm of sheriff's deputies and California Highway Patrol officers.

About 75 chanting, sign-wielding men were herded together in the middle of the boulevard, which was closed to traffic for about 30 minutes. The men quickly left the area when deputies ordered them to disperse.

The Sun City clash comes during a drywallers' strike in Southern California that has included allegations that strikers have vandalized construction projects and threatened, beaten and shot at site workers.

"We're getting numerous reports of property damage, verbal and physical intimidation and personal injury being caused by the strikers. Projects have overrun by herds of these guys where they destroy drywall," said Ken Willis, a spokesman for the Building Industry Association of Southern California.

Greg Vojtko / *The Press-Enterprise*

Protesting drywall workers block traffic in Sun City at McCall Boulevard and Sherman Road yesterday.

Up to 1,200 of Southern California's 3,000 to 4,000 drywall tapers and hangers went on strike June 1 in an effort to unionize and reverse a decade-long slide in wages.

Since then, the strike has shut down most of the relatively few residential projects under construction, according to contractors, strikers and Carpenters Local Union 2361 in Orange. The union has denied responsibility for the strike but acknowledges assisting the non-union workers in hope of organizing them.

Drywallers' wages began falling in 1981 as a steady influx of cheap labor from Mexico immigrated into Southern California. Once represented by the carpenters union, residential drywallers de-unionized under the pressure, and many Anglo workers left the industry. Now the vast majority of drywallers are Hispanic, and they are organizing to bring the union back.

Efforts to bring the strike to a close in some areas have failed. In San Diego Wednesday, some 500 drywall workers rejected a wage increase offered by local subcontractors.

The hangers and tapers voted down the proposal by a 295-183 margin at the end of a four-hour meeting, according to labor representative Tomas Garcia.

In Riverside County Monday, sheriff's deputies and police dispersed demonstrators at a Temecula development after vandals caused $30,000 in damage. One man was arrested on suspicion of vandalism and another on suspicion of assault and battery. Both were cited and released.

Last weekend, demonstrators jumped a fence at a project site in Moreno Valley and sprayed oil on installed drywall, Willis said.

Yesterday, a man with a gun was reported in the vicinity of a Glen Avon site at Jurupa Road and Tyrolite Street, where approximately 60 drywall employees were striking. A sheriff's deputy said no shots were fired and no one was hurt.

Staff writer Michael McBride contributed to this report.

You're Invited to Hear
Janine Tartaglia

"There's more to life than news, weather and sports." That's what former television newscaster, Janine Tartaglia, discovered while covering the Iranian hostage crisis of

Workers protest: *Drywall installer Nicolas Munoz pickets the County Administration Building yesterday to protest low wages that he says make it "difficult to survive."*

Hispanic drywall workers walk off jobs in pay protest

By SHARON SPIVAK and L. ERIK BRATT
Staff Writers

Hundreds of Hispanic drywall workers, claiming they are victims of pay discrimination, walked off their jobs yesterday, bringing home construction to a halt at job sites across Southern California.

Encircling the County Administration Building on Pacific Highway, a crowd of drywall workers estimated at between 500 and 1,000 enthusiastically chanted "Si se puede!" (Yes we can!) and announced the organization of a new labor movement.

"We're just tired of being treated like mules," said a 29-year-old Temecula drywall worker who asked that his name not be used. "It's been 10 years since we've had a raise.

"Within the last year our wages have been cut 35 to 50 percent," he said. "We have no medical or dental benefits. We work Saturdays, 10 to 12 hours a day, no overtime (pay)."

The drywall worker said the labor force doing drywall work on Southern California tract homes is predominantly Hispanic — most are U.S. citizens, some are undocumented workers — and is systematically underpaid.

The protesting drywall workers say it is more than the recession that has cut their pay. They claim Anglo drywall workers still can earn between $600 to $800 per week. The Hispanic drywall workers say they now earn roughly $200 to $300 a week — some $6 an hour — and believe cuts are being forced by greedy developers trying to find scapegoats to bear the brunt of the recession.

Protest organizer Tony Hernandez said drywall contractors "are teaming up against us. They're ripping us off left and right."

See **Walkout** on Page F-2

Walkout

Hispanic workers want better pay

Continued from F-1

Local drywall companies said they are sympathetic to the pay dispute, but they strongly disagreed that they have cut wages along racial lines. Rather, officials said, the problem has been how to pay a large, unskilled work force the wages and benefits they are seeking in the face of a recession.

"In our industry here alone, there are about 2,000 of these guys that are on strike," said Joe Sayatovich, president of Sayatovich Drywall Interiors. "The average company cannot afford $350 or $400 per employee (for health insurance)."

"It's having considerable impact," Sayatovich said of the strike. " ... Of course, there's very little construction going on out there anyways and with these guys out of work, it's even worse."

"You shut an industry down and it affects everybody."

Sayatovich said that some of the workers' pay claims are legitimate and he hopes that the strike can be settled within three or four days. He said, however, that it will take a joint effort of builders, subcontractors and the labor force to resolve the problems.

One local subcontractor said Hispanic workers literally took over the drywall hanging trade in Southern California about five years ago because they were willing to accept much lower wages. He said roughly 90 percent of drywall workers in the Southland today are Hispanic, and their influence has expanded to other areas of construction as well.

"They control most of the construction," said the subcontractor, who wished to remain anonymous because of personal threats from the labor movement.

The subcontractor said most construction workers, not just drywall hangers, have been squeezed by the recession. Still, he believes the drywall hangers have a legitimate complaint, and favors boosting wages and implementing a health plan.

Some developers, however, are downplaying the impact of the labor movement.

Paul Tryon, executive vice president of the Building Industry Association, said the walkout is still fairly isolated and will have little impact because the building cycle is at its lowest level in years.

Nevertheless, the BIA reported many builders have been impacted by the unofficial strike, including Pardee Construction, Woodcrest Development Inc., Presley of San Diego, Davidson Communities and Fieldstone Development.

Work has also slowed on a Scripps Ranch project by California Pacific Homes.

Mike Madigan, Pardee senior vice president in San Diego, said the walkout has impacted several of its eight projects in the county, primarily those in the drywall stage of construction.

Residential tracts are completed and released to the public in phases. Madigan said work on units requiring drywall installation, which comes after framing and wrapping, have come close to a standstill.

Mike Dunham, director of operations for California Pacific Homes, said profit margins at his firm have reached rock bottom on many projects. In some cases, the developer is losing money. He said the company would take a wait-and-see attitude before looking at some of its alternatives, including hiring its own workers to get the job done.

Not every builder in the county has been impacted by the walkout, though.

Greg Arnold, president of Diversified Builders Services, the general contractor for National City-based Corky McMillin Cos., said none of the company's five projects have been affected by the walkout, although only two are in the drywall stage.

The drywall contractor for Diversified Builders has been able to retain most of its drywall workers because it has not lowered wages within the past two years, Arnold said.

Leaders of the labor movement have passed by the project sites three times within recent months, though, trying to gain the support of their fellow workers. If they show again, Arnold has instructed his drywall employees to stop working until they leave.

Given the depressed condition of the real estate market, Arnold predicted the movement would not last much longer. "Right now, a lot of people in the industry would love to have that job," he said.

Local drywall subcontractors formed a makeshift organization last week called the San Diego County Drywall Association that is scheduled to meet with leaders of the labor movement Monday. A meeting between the workers and county equal opportunity officials is set for today.

But each day the workers wait for answers is more difficult for their families.

"A lot of people are losing their houses because they can't make enough money," said the Temecula drywaller who requested anonymity. "They're losing cars. They're forced to live in apartments with three to four families in one apartment."

Carlos Dominguez, 24, of National City, said he used to have his own apartment, but now lives with nine other people so he can pay the rent.

"It's hard to bring food to the table," added Nicolas Muñoz, 32, a drywall worker from Fullerton. "Things are so expensive. My wages now are $250 a week. With that kind of money, it's hard to survive."

Seeking 20 Percent Wage Hike

Drywallers Taking A Walk Off Southern California Jobs

By THOR KAMBAN BIBERMAN
San Diego Daily Transcript Staff Writer

Drywallers have been walking off residential construction jobs from Los Angeles to the Mexican border, and many San Diego projects have apparently been affected by the walkout.

Reports have indicated that as many as half of Southern California's more than 3,000 drywall hangers and tapers have left job sites.

Yesterday there were scattered reports that jobs by Pardee Construction, Presley of San Diego and Davidson Communities are among those affected, but qualified sources at those firms could not be reached for comment.

Brian Milich, a project manager with The Fieldstone Co., acknowledged the walkout is affecting the firm's projects, but downplayed its importance. "It's not a significant impact at this point," he said.

This is not to say, however, that Milich isn't concerned. "Anytime there is the threat of people not finishing the jobs they have started, that is cause for concern," he said.

Milich also acknowledged there had been picketers at Fieldstone's Westridge single-family project in Rancho Penasquitos last week.

Late last week, more than 100 workers also picketed the Tierra housing development in San Marcos, and there have been reports of protests at the Coronado Point development in the South Bay.

Charles Duggan of Great Western Drywall said he understood that projects also were being affected at Renaissance-La Jolla in University City as well as in Bonita.

Sources indicate there are as many as 2,000 (mostly Hispanic) drywallers in the county. The protests center around wages that have actually declined in recent years. Drywallers are generally paid by the piece, and while they were getting an average of about 6½ cents a linear foot as recently as a year ago, the wage has dropped to 5½ cents and as low as 4 cents per linear foot in some cases.

"They do have a legitimate complaint, but this is not the way to go about it," said a drywall contractor who preferred not to be identified.

Representatives of the striking drywallers could not be reached for comment yesterday, but they are believed to be asking for a 20 percent wage increase for drywall hangers and installers and a 20 percent wage increase for drywall finishers as well.

Leon Graves of C.A. Skyhook Co., which does finishing of staircases in homes after drywall has been completed, said it appears that the walkout is affecting most residential builders.

"Pickets at different places have been holding up work," he added.

A superintendent at a Renaissance-La Jolla project said he had two drywallers working on a one-day job yesterday but that a group of men supporting the strike arrived and intimidated them yesterday morning.

The group of strikers is said to be non-union. But in San Diego County, the District Council of Carpenters has lent the group its union hall on Mercury Street on Kearny Mesa so meetings may be held.

"We gave them the use of the hall. We're for anybody who's trying to better themselves, and they're not the violent type," said William Grootank, a special representative for the carpenters' union.

While Grootank says they are a benign group, the unnamed drywall contractor said he was threatened yesterday and warned not to talk too much.

"This thing is getting hostile," the unidentified source said.

POLICE/COURTS

149 DEFENDANTS

Putting drywall strikers on trial could cost OC taxpayers $100,000

By Gregg Zoroya
The Orange County Register

Putting 149 striking drywall workers on trial for misdemeanor trespassing could cost Orange County more than $100,000.

And that is only if the trials — 15 are tentatively planned, with about 10 defendants each — end in one day. Deputy Public Defender Vicki Briles, who represents one striker, said a 10-defendant trial would last at least a week.

"They bit off a lot," she said Tuesday of the decision by prosecutors to accuse all 149 strikers of misdemeanor trespassing in connection with a disturbance at a Mission Viejo construction site Thursday.

Prosecutors filed complaints expecting at least some of the drywall workers — part of about 4,000 on strike across Southern California since June 1 — to plead guilty in exchange for a guaranteed release from jail.

But during dramatic and lengthy arraignment proceedings Monday, the strikers pleaded innocent and demanded trials. Forty-seven workers without criminal records were released on signed promises to appear in court, while the rest remain in custody in lieu of bail ranging from $1,000 to $10,000.

One of those released — Jose Vasquez, 26, of Fullerton, a drywall worker for seven years — said Tuesday: "We pleaded not guilty because most of us, we didn't do anything. ... They were just trying to break this (picketing) up."

All entered innocent pleas, he said, "to make the point that we ought to just stick together." They have even received support, he said, from other inmates in the Orange County Jail.

But in police reports, deputies alleged that there were several violent demonstrations leading to the incident Thursday, when a site was overrun by picketers who attacked and dragged away six strike breakers.

Asked about the possible high cost of prosecuting the strikers, Assistant District Attorney Wally Wade said Tuesday, "We could spend no money on the criminal-justice system if we just quit enforcing the law."

Court officials estimate that the cost to taxpayers of a jury trial usually averages about $7,100 per day.

The trials are tentatively scheduled for July 21, July 28 and Aug. 4, with five trials per day.

Prosecutors opted to file misdemeanor complaints after rejecting an Orange County Sheriff's Department request to charge all 149 strikers with felony conspiracy to kidnap. Deputies allege that six strike breakers were forcibly removed from the Mission Viejo site and later released.

Meanwhile, Roy Navarro, one of the five members of an organizing committee of drywall strikers, said Tuesday that demonstrations at job sites continue apace. He said strikers have been encouraged by the construction delays caused by their work stoppage.

The population at the Orange County Jail rose to a record 4,908 on Friday, largely because of the influx of the arrested strikers. The five-jail system is designed for 3,200 inmates and has lately held 4,800.

To offset the Fourth of July holiday burden, deputies set free 175 to 200 convicted inmates, granting emergency sentence reductions of up to 20 percent, Assistant Sheriff Jerry Krans said. They had been convicted of crimes such as assault, burglary, theft and narcotics violations.

Drywall Installers Halt Work Over Pay

■ Labor: Hundreds of workers are seeking higher wages that existed a decade ago when the industry was unionized.

By MICHAEL FLAGG
TIMES STAFF WRITER

ORANGE—Hundreds of men who put drywall in new homes throughout Southern California have walked off the job, shutting down work at housing tracts from Los Angeles to the Mexican border.

The men say their wages are lower now than 10 years ago before home builders and their subcontractors broke the union that represented most of the drywallers.

The workers want a union and a contract that requires the drywall companies to pay health benefits and wages higher than the $200 a week that the men say they average now. The drywall companies say they can't afford to pay higher wages in a soft housing market.

The drywallers have been out of work since June 1 and have been picketing job sites sporadically since then. There are between 7,000 and 8,000 drywall workers in Southern California, workers say.

This is the third time in the last 10 years that the drywallers have walked off their jobs. But this time, they say, they are determined to stick it out until they get a union.

The workers say they are better organized this time, partly because many of them come from the same village in central Mexico, El Magüey. Many of them are also related.

The drywallers say they have been planning the job action since last fall and had urged their fellow workers to save enough money in the event of a prolonged walkout.

"Everybody, even people in the lowest-paid factories, got at least a 50-cent raise over the last 10 years," complained Roy Navarro of Fullerton, a drywaller with two children. "We can't even afford to take our children to the hospital. We have to go to the cheapest clinics and wait three or four hours, and I still have to pay $100 I can't afford.

The drywall subcontractors, meanwhile, say they're caught between their workers and the home-building companies, who insist on holding down costs in a bad market.

"Everyone agrees the men in the field should be earning more," said Kathy Davidson, administrator at Nuwalco Inc. in the San Bernardino county of Upland, one of the larger drywall companies.

"But as long as one subcontractor underbids us, we all have to bid low to get the work."

Drywall, or plasterboard, forms the inner walls of houses. It comes in panels that weigh more than 100 pounds each and has to be manually put in place, nailed down and then smoothed over.

"Hanging" drywall is said to be one of the hardest jobs in construction. The drywall companies now pay a piece rate of 4 cents to 6 cents a square foot. In the mid-1980s, the drywall workers say, they were paid 8 cents to 9 cents a square foot—and that's all they're asking for now.

Drywallers—

Continued from Page 1B

many San Diego-area firms that have been named in the most recent lawsuits. Other firms that have virtually identical suits filed against them include Academy Drywall, Great Western (Polvera) Drywall, Rancho Installation Inc., Coast Plastering Corp., Gold Coast Industries, D.J. Drywall, High Performance Drywall and D'Acquisto Drywall, among others.

Rich Kirsch of Academy Drywall, who said his firm has yet to be served (most if all of the drywall contractors have yet to be served with these latest lawsuits), said small drywall firms like his could be hurt if they have to spend a great deal of money to defend themselves.

"They are going after every contractor, no matter how small, and I don't think that's right," Kirsch said.

Mark Steve, president of Academy Drywall, said it was also was his understanding that the lawsuits would "disappear" if the firms agreed to sign the union contract.

Meanwhile, reports of violence at job sites continued into last week — and police officers have been a regular sight on residential jobs from the South Bay to Escondido.

Contractors say they have no choice but to call the police. Hernandez claims his workers have been the victims of violence more often than not, and that the police are being called in too many of these cases.

"How much money are they paying the San Diego Police, anyway?" Hernandez asked. "It makes the city look pretty silly."

While the battle between drywall workers and contractors continues at a fever pitch, the Associated Builders & Contractors is reportedly in the process of putting the finishing touches on a health benefits package for drywall workers.

Hernandez, while continuing to seek higher wages (the base rate rose to 7 cents per foot on Oct. 1), has said that health benefits is the single-most important issue.

Robert Winterton, ABC executive vice president, said drywall contractors either have begun to or soon will begin paying money into a pool to provide health coverage for their workers. The program is slated to go into effect Jan. 1.

Failure To Pay Overtime Alleged

Blizzard Of Class-Action Suits Hits Local Drywalling Firms

By THOR KAMBAN BIBERMAN
San Diego Daily Transcript Staff Writer

Ten or more class-action lawsuits have been filed in U.S. District Court here against local drywallers within the past few days for allegedly failing to pay overtime wages.

These lawsuits are in addition to at least 38 other class actions over the same issue that have been reported filed by drywall hangers and tapers in Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange and Riverside counties.

Steven Kaplan, an attorney with the law firm of Gilbert & Sackman of Los Angeles, claims that between 2,000 to 4,000 workers who worked for about 200 drywall companies throughout Southern California have been cheated out of millions of dollars in overtime.

"The San Diego situation is different than in other areas," he said. "The employers are more intransigent (uncompromising) where you are. Many firms elsewhere are seeking a resolution.

"I don't know whether it's just the business climate, but firms in your area have refused to have negotiations. I can tell you that the heat is going to be turned up in San Diego."

Kaplan said in Los Angeles attempts are being made for all the related cases to be heard by one judge. He said he doesn't know if a similar effort will be made in San Diego.

In Los Angeles, a group composed of members of the Pacific Rim Drywall Association has been attempting to resolve the matter without further litigation.

Most drywallers named in this most recent wave of lawsuits who the *Transcript* was able to reach claimed this latest action by the drywall workers is nothing but a ploy to try to force drywall contractors to sign a union contract.

There have been reports that lawsuits for drywall workers in Riverside County have been dropped after firms in that area agreed to sign a union contract.

Joe Sayatovich of Sayatovich Drywall Interiors and J&J Management in San Diego alleges what the drywall workers are doing is nothing but blackmail and is against the law. He said he plans to sue them.

"We're going to sue them right back for all the damages they have caused us and we'll see if we can't put some of them in jail," he said.

Sayatovich contends the lawsuits have nothing to do with overtime.

"We have tapers that make in excess of $1,200 a week," he said. "Does it sound like they're underpaid to you?

"We are never going to sign a union contract and let them extort money from us. They're nothing but a bunch of mobsters."

Tony Hernandez, who has been trying to organize drywall workers from San Diego to Kern County, countered that the firms named in the lawsuits have failed to pay fair wages.

"It is the truth and they know it, and we can prove it," he said. "We can show you pay stubs. If those don't show you that (the drywall companies) aren't breaking the law, I don't know what does."

Hernandez acknowledged that he might offer to negotiate to drop the lawsuits if companies agreed to sign a union contract, but emphasized again that whether or not this is done, the claims still have merit.

He added that he is currently in the process of negotiating union drywall contracts with 32 companies in Riverside, San Bernardino and Kern counties.

Sayatovich's firm was just one of

Please turn to Page 3B